How the Church Influenced (and Still Can Influence) Western Civilization

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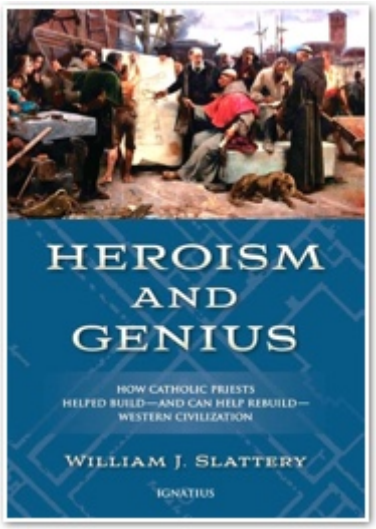
By William J. Slattery



I am in awe of Father William Slattery's command of his subject. He is, after all, covering 1,600 years of Western civilization — a civilization that he argues was "born from the womb of Catholicism and midwifed by the priesthood."

That is the theme of this profound book, and it will not make him any friends among secular historians who consider the Enlightenment era the high-water mark of the West.

As for the Catholic Church, she has been — and still is — derided by the secularists as the enemy of progress and science, who fed the Catholic faithful superstition and whose priests never contributed anything to society or the advancement of humankind.

Father Slattery is fearless as he takes on the secularists. He reveals how Catholic priests transformed society, established schools when most of Europe — including Charlemagne — could not read, invented the university, defended and encouraged the code of chivalry, championed the cause of women, were the originators of Gothic architecture, and were the fathers of free-enterprise economics.

Father Slattery tells us how in their libraries and scriptoria Benedictine monks preserved the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, how they became missionaries to England and the Germanic tribes and, through the Catholic faith, brought them into the religious, social and political realm of Christendom, making them part of something much greater than their tribal kingdoms ever were.

He reveals that the Benedictines were innovators in agriculture, developing new methods of farming that increased crop yields — essential information during the long centuries when famine was always just around the corner.

But, more importantly, whenever the Church required reform or revitalization, the inspiration and the practical application came from the monasteries.

Among the many things I didn't know (and I was a medievalist!) was the Church's inflexible opposition to what we call racism.

In the ancient world, it was commonplace for one race or ethnic group to detest and demean every other race or ethnic group. This uncharitable and unhealthy way of thinking survived into the Dark Ages, even among Christians. The Church would not tolerate it. Romans, Franks, Saxons, Britons and Celts were viewed equally.

"The Church," Father Slattery writes, "was Catholic, truly and universally open like a harbor."

To illustrate this point, he refers to a miniature painting in Charlemagne's Breviary in which the Church is portrayed as a fountain welcoming everyone to drink of her living water.

And just as the Church would not tolerate segregation among the faithful, it would not tolerate racially or ethnically exclusive Churches. There was no Celtic Church or Frankish Church; there was only the Catholic Church.

Related to this is another revolutionary principle priests preached from the pulpit — that for a marriage to be valid, the man and woman must have chosen freely to marry each other. In other words, no more arranged marriages.

Sadly, as we know from history, for many centuries and in many places, especially among the upper classes, the tradition of the arranged marriage hung on. But the Church didn't give up the fight, and today (at least in the West) the freedom to choose a husband or wife is the norm among Christians and non-Christians.

Equally revolutionary was the Church's assertion that the rights of the individual outweighed the demands of his or her tribe, or nation or even family. The notion that the individual had God-given dignity transformed the way people thought of themselves.

Father Slattery writes, "The revolutionary principle of the individual's dignity would shape the new bedrock of emerging Christendom, radically configure the Western psyche, and survive even decades of Nazi, Fascist and Communist brainwashing."

And priests were the ones who spread these new ideas, argued in their favor and preserved them in dangerous times. Under the Nazis and the Communists, many priests lost their lives because they would not accept the notion that human beings are nothing more than ants in a totalitarian anthill.

While it is fascinating to read about the history-making, world-changing ideas promoted by the Church and her priests, what I really enjoyed were the stories of individual priests who showed true genius and in many cases heroism as they carried the teachings of Christ and his Church to every corner of Europe.

Father Slattery does a splendid job revealing the personalities of these men.

The Irishman St. Columba (521-597) left his homeland and sailed with a few disciples to found a monastery on the island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. He was what we would call a classic overachiever. At almost any hour of day or night, he could be either praying, or studying or writing. And in his spare time, he traveled to Scotland to convert the Picts. He also took the first step toward forging Scotland's national identity by encouraging the Scots and the Picts to show a little backbone and stop paying tribute to the High King of Ireland (I'm sure, much to the irritation of the Irish king).

Then there is Alcuin (c. 730-804), the man who founded schools for Charlemagne and in many ways was the emperor's best friend. Charlemagne referred to Alcuin as "my mentor."

All the chroniclers agree that Alcuin was eminently likable. He was loyal. He was empathetic. Affection ran deep in him. The only time when his charm faded and he became cold, hard as steel, was when someone challenged Catholic principles.

Especially interesting is St. Boniface (c. 680-754), the Englishman who laid the foundation for the Catholic faith and culture in then-barbarian Germany. Father

Slattery quotes the historian Henry Daniel-Rops on Boniface's character. He was undeniably holy, but he also suffered from bouts of depression.

As a missionary, he was called upon to perform acts of heroism, yet by nature he was timid and unsure of himself. Nonetheless, when the occasion called for it, Boniface usually rose to the task. In his battle against paganism, he cut down the sacred oaks worshipped by the Germans — an act that could have cost him his life. He had no patience for decadent bishops and did not hesitate to depose them. He would even fire off a letter to the pope if he thought the Holy Father's job performance was not all it could be.

But he also did something missionaries of the Dark Ages rarely, if ever, did: He sat down with pagan priests and listened as they explained what they believed and why they believed it. Only when they were finished would he, with equal patience and charity, point out the inconsistencies and then unfold to them the truth and beauty of Christianity.

These men and countless other priests like them (to one degree or another) helped to build Western civilization.

Father Slattery argues that, in our own day, when Western civilization in general and Christian principles in particular are under attack, priests once again are being called upon to rebuild what is falling into ruins. He asserts that it is holy, even heroic, priests, "who, in the use of their creativity and freedom, under the power of sanctifying grace, bring about change." That is a reassuring thought, and I've never heard it expressed so clearly.

I confess I am taken with Father Slattery's *Heroism and Genius*. It is one of the brainiest-yet-accessible books I've read in a long time. Go buy a copy for yourself, and buy another one for your favorite priest. We've got a lot of work to do.

Original Link:
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